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ABSTRACT

This booklet focuses on assessing the performance of individual trustees, a responsibility that often falls to the committee on trustees (called the nominating committee on some campuses). It includes a checklist, sample job description, and self-assessment survey that can be tailored to reflect unique institutional characteristics. Every board should define appropriate and reasonable expectations for its members, including the importance of setting a personal example of commitment, such as through an annual contribution. Once a board commits itself to defining reasonable guidelines for its members, it is a logical next step to ask individual board members to reflect on their own performances through a self-administered survey. A sample survey and a sample trustee audit that can be completed by all trustees to enable the comparison of perceptions are included. (SLD)

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BOARD BASICS

BOARD LEADERSHIP

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ASSESSING INDIVIDUAL TRUSTEE PERFORMANCE

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AN ADAPTATION BY MERRILL P. SCHWARTZ

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Merrill P. Schwartz

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Assessing Individual Trustee Performance is adapted from chapter 5 in the book, *Presidential and Board Assessment in Higher Education: Purposes, Policies and Strategies*, by Richard T. Ingram and William A. Weary, published by AGB in 2000.

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The *Board Basics Series* provides information about board responsibilities in an effort to strengthen the contributions and effectiveness of trustees and governing boards. The series is intended to promote good policies and practices without necessarily representing or implying endorsement by the association or its members. Additional copies are available by calling the AGB Publications Department at 800/356-6317.

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The legal authority of college and university governing boards lies in the collective action of its members, but who can deny the importance of the contributions of each individual trustee? More than 50,000 volunteers serve on the governing boards of the more than 3,200 traditional tax-exempt colleges and universities in the United States. Of those individuals, 40,000 serve on the boards of some 1,600 independent institutions, and the remainder serve on public institution boards. American higher education, as never before, needs committed and well-informed trustees, men and women who are willing to set good personal examples in an era when assessment strategies of all kinds are being implemented at their institutions.

In higher education today, there is a healthy trend toward formal assessment of the performance of individual board members who are eligible for reappointment or reelection. Performance assessment is part of the ongoing cycle of cultivating, orienting, and educating individuals to serve on the board. Clarifying reasonable standards of performance provides needed guidance to individual trustees and enables the governing board to hold its individual members accountable.

Some board chairs and chief executives may wonder about the wisdom or even the appropriateness of evaluating the performance of the individuals who voluntarily give their time, talent, and treasure to their boards. But it is arguable that trustee service is a privilege—not a right. Furthermore, it is inconsistent for governing boards and for individual trustees to call for rigorous performance reviews for faculty, staff, programs, and services without setting their own good example.

This booklet focuses on assessing the performance of individual trustees, a responsibility that often falls to the committee on trustees (called the nominating committee on some campuses). It includes a checklist, sample job description, and self-assessment survey that can be tailored to reflect unique institutional characteristics.

When boards take the time to assess their performance, they typically focus on their collective performance. But it is equally important for individual trustees to be held accountable to reasonable standards.

THE STATEMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES BECOMES THE FRAMEWORK BY WHICH BOARD MEMBERS CAN REVIEW THEIR OWN PERFORMANCES.

In contrast to their counterparts among corporate for-profit directors (for whom assessment is rare), growing numbers of college and university board members are formally assessing their commitment to their trusteeships. A 1998 AGB survey conducted by Merrill Schwartz found that 39 percent of board chairs of *independent* colleges and universities said their institutions had *some kind* of process for assessing the performance of individual board members; in contrast, only 6 percent of board chairs of *public* institutions reported affirmatively. The considerable difference between the two sectors likely reflects the differences in appointing authority; trustees of most independent boards select their own successors, while most public trustees are appointed by the state's governor.

The survey also shows that the majority of independent boards that have a review process for individual trustees conduct them "at the end of terms or when considered for reappointment" (76 percent); 42 percent of public boards that did so made it part of the process of a full board assessment. Many boards in both sectors undoubtedly used the "trustee audit" form (see pages 13-15) that is an optional part of AGB's *Self-Study Criteria Survey* for governing boards, which includes a section designed to help individual members think constructively about their knowledge of and commitment to the work of their board. More than 16,000 board members have used these surveys, now part of AGB's Board Self-Study Workshop.

Another encouraging trend among independent colleges and universities is their adoption of two related documents. The first is a statement of expectations for individual board members (see pages 7-9), and the second is a short survey that incumbent board members who are eligible for reelection or reappointment are asked to complete before the end of their current terms (see pages 10-11). The committee on trustees typically undertakes these two initiatives by board mandate or authorization.

The statement of responsibilities becomes the framework by which board members can review their own performances. In private colleges and universities, the committee can use it as a basis for reviewing the performance of incumbent trustees. It also is a wonderful means for educating candidates about trusteeship and helping them decide whether to accept an invitation to join a board. Just as every board should have an appropriate "job description" or statement of corporate responsibilities clearly presented in its bylaws, a written statement of responsibilities for individual board members has proven to be of great value in promoting effective trustee service.

The unfortunate practice of telling prospective board members that expectations for them are minimal has virtually disappeared. Today, before individuals join boards of any kind, they want to know what to expect. Indeed, a board's ability to be explicit about expectations and performance standards is a sign of healthy governance and substantive trusteeship.

In public higher education, newly appointed or elected board members often arrive with little understanding of their responsibilities, the extent of their time commitment, or how to cope with the ambiguities of trusteeship. Although most public boards and presidents have little or no influence on the selection of colleague board members, statements of trustee responsibilities can be agreed upon and used to encourage responsible performance. Statements go a long way toward clarifying the kind of commitment and guiding the behavior that all board members should seek in one another for the good of their institutions and the people they serve. Effective board chair leadership includes responsibility for correcting inappropriate trustee behavior and having a set of guidelines adopted by the board (or a predecessor board).

BREAKING NEW GROUND. It is a tribute to the nation's college and university trustees that so many are willing to participate conscientiously in *board* assessment activities. According to a recent national

survey, 55 percent of public and 44 percent of private boards conducted a board self-assessment during a recent five-year period (Schwartz, 1998). But being willing—*as individuals*—to subject themselves to honest introspection, let alone independent review by a board committee, requires quite a leap of faith. Yet the members of many boards are moving in this new and important direction, particularly in independent higher education. They are breaking new ground and setting important precedents for their successors, and they are setting a good example for their counterparts in public higher education.

It is highly desirable for every board—public as well as private—to define appropriate and reasonable expectations of its members. Public colleges and universities increasingly depend on private gifts and public trustees should be able to see the importance of setting a personal example on this score. Of course, we acknowledge that an annual contribution is but one measure of commitment.

Once a board commits itself to defining reasonable guidelines for its members, it is a logical next step to ask individual board members to reflect on their own performances by means of a self-administered survey. For private institutions, only members of the committee on trustees should see the responses of other individual board members. For public institutions without such committees, individual responses at least can be aggregated for review and discussion. The important thing is to experiment with one approach or another to establish a new tradition within the board's culture. The process and substance will improve with time.

The "Illustrative Statement of Board Member Commitment and Responsibility" on pages 7-9 is adapted from a statement drafted by a board committee on trustees at a residential liberal arts college, following a retreat devoted to self-study of the board's performance. A consensus emerged that the committee should assess the performance of all trustees when they become eligible for reelection. The board acknowledged that it first needed to define its expectations for all members, list what constituted meaningful trusteeship, and—without losing the commitment of the most deserving veteran board members—encourage greater trustee turnover. Consensus prevailed that this endeavor was preferable to the imposition of term limits or the requirement of a one-year hiatus before the possibility of reelection after a specified period of service. After five years of experience with the statement (and a self-review survey), the trustees and college officials have said they are pleased with the process and its efforts.

There are two basic approaches to self-review. The first is to develop a short questionnaire that cites desirable standards for all board members. For example, a private board might require all trustees eligible for renomination to respond to a few questions approximately one year before the end of their terms. (See "Illustrative Cover Letter to Accompany Trustee Self-Review Survey" on page 12.) Coupled with attendance, giving records, and other evidence of commitment to the institution and to trusteeship, the written responses provide the basis for candid discussion within the appropriate committee. The results of this semi-private process enable the board chair, president, and appropriate committee to gauge the relative contributions and interest of individual trustees. In turn, trustees have an opportunity to raise concerns or issues and reflect on their willingness to commit to another period of service. Often, the board's leaders can address any concerns the trustee might express about his or her service.

This approach, using a self-review survey, can be adapted from the version illustrated on pages 10-11. But it is important for the board first to discuss and recognize the need for periodic and personal self-assessment. This can be encouraged and accomplished as part of a board self-study workshop or retreat where other important and related matters are candidly discussed. Consider using an external consultant, who can more easily facilitate this practice than can board or institutional leaders.

A second way to proceed is to distribute an appropriate survey to all board members simultaneously—either for discussion as part of a retreat focused on board performance or as part of a meeting focused solely on the survey's anonymous, aggregated responses. This can be useful every three to five years as part of a board self-assessment workshop. A helpful variation is to use a "contract" for each individual to set annual goals and to review their individual contributions and progress made toward achieving these goals during the previous year. This process provides the board chair (or chair of the committee on trustees) with an opportunity to talk one-on-one with trustees about their unmet goals and new ideas, and it often makes the decision about reappointment much easier for all involved (Chait, Holland and Taylor, 1996, pp. 66-69). An example of the second assessment approach—a "trustee audit" for use with all board members simultaneously every three or four years—can be found on pages 13-15. All governing boards should experiment with some form of self assessment—for themselves as collective corporate entities and as individuals.

Checklist of Good Practices for Enhancing Performance

- Develop, approve, and provide prospective trustees with a Statement of Board Member Commitment and Responsibilities. Discuss realistic expectations for service with the help of board officers and other leaders.

- Orient new trustees to both the institution and the trusteeship. Involve current trustees in ongoing trustee education (at board meetings, retreats, and outside workshops). Observe appropriate ceremonies in welcoming new members to the board.

- Have all board members sign a conflict of interest and disclosure statement annually.

- Consider an annual "contract" or letter of agreement for each board member to set individual goals for the coming year and review accomplishments in the previous year. Hold separate meetings with each trustee and the chair of the committee of trustees (or board chair) to discuss the contract, and at appropriate times, the possibility of reappointment. Alternatively (especially for independent-sector trustees), ask all incumbent trustees eligible for reelection to complete a short survey for the committee on trustees one year before their current terms end.

- Every three-to-four years, conduct a retreat devoted to the board's performance assessment. Aggregated results of a separate self-assessment survey of individual trustees can be included (especially for public-sector trustees).

- Review committee assignments every other year and discuss needs for information or education annually, using feedback from board members and perhaps assessment instruments. Plan board education activities accordingly.

- Recognize outstanding service and honor retiring board members with appropriate ceremony/recognition.

Illustrative Statement of Board Member Commitment and Responsibilities

Note: This statement is adapted from a version written by a committee on trustees at a residential liberal arts college after its governing board conducted a self-study workshop.

For more than two centuries, _____ College has benefited from the devotion, service, and contributions of many thousands of its alumni and friends. From this broad constituency, a relative handful of individuals have been asked to assume the special responsibility and honor of serving as trustees. The performance of those invited to serve in this capacity is directly related to the institution's continued vitality and strength. Thus, it is essential that individuals who are invited to serve as trustees understand the responsibilities they are agreeing to fulfill.

Members of the board of trustees of _____ College serve as ultimate fiduciaries in their oversight of institutional affairs in accord with the college's charter, bylaws, evolving statements of mission and purpose, and institutional plans. In serving in this critical capacity collectively as a governing board, the trustees hereby clarify for themselves and for those invited to join them what is expected of its individual members.

All individual trustees are expected to have a deep and abiding commitment to the college's values and traditions as an exceptional liberal arts institution. In their words and deeds, trustees should dedicate themselves to upholding and strengthening the college's tradition of providing a high-quality liberal arts education to its students at a level of excellence commensurate with its reputation as one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the country.

Trustees should accept the responsibility of providing financial support to the college through personal contributions to annual giving and special fund-raising campaigns and through participation in the solicitation of other individuals and organizations. The college should be a primary beneficiary of the trustee's personal philanthropy according to his or her means. As a guideline, the board of trustees has established a minimum annual goal of $5,000 in any combination of personal giving and successful solicitation of others, restricted or unrestricted—although it is highly desirable that at least a portion will be designated to the annual fund.

Trustees are expected to participate regularly in board meetings and to demonstrate familiarity with the materials distributed in advance. They should contribute to the board's efforts to make informed and thoughtful decisions consistent with its fiduciary responsibilities and the college's mission. Trustees should assume expenses associated with board and other meetings.

Each trustee should serve willingly on at least one board committee and ordinarily should accept new assignments from the board chair from time to time. Each trustee also should freely express interest in other committee assignments to enable the college to take fuller advantage of his or her experiences and talents.

Trustees should participate in other board and college activities to the extent their time permits. Such participation strengthens their knowledge of the institution they hold in trust for the current and future generations and contributes significantly to the board's standing within the college community.

Trustees should actively promote the college to alumni, prospective students, donors, the media, the business community, elected officials, foundations, and the public at large. Such informed advocacy reflects favorably on their commitment to the college and can lead to advancing its reputation, growth, and prosperity.

Trustees at all times should serve the college as a whole, rather than any particular internal or external constituency. In this regard, trustees should not make judgments on the basis of information received from individuals or groups who have a perceived or real grievance or particular cause. Substantive information should be referred to the president or board chair. Only the president and the board chair are authorized to speak for the college or its governing board.

Trustees should contribute to the board's responsibility to distinguish between college management and its governance. The board should monitor the implementation of its policies but steer away from their administration.

Trustees should avoid any situation that could cause even the appearance of a conflict of interest in accord with the board's current policy. Any potential or actual conflict should be disclosed to the board chair and handled in accordance with board policy.

Trustees should refrain from asking the president or other members of the college community for special personal favors.

Trustees should maintain the confidentiality of the information conveyed in the board's executive sessions concerning personnel and other matters. Trustees should remember that their comments and utterances carry great weight with others and that the college can be easily placed at great disadvantage if discretion is not exercised at all times.

Trustees are elected by the full board for individual terms designated by the committee on trustees. In keeping with a mandate given to it by the board of trustees, the committee on trustees is charged with reviewing the performance, meeting attendance, personal philanthropy, and other contributions of all board members who are eligible for renomination and reelection. Except as otherwise cited in the board's bylaws, trustees are eligible to serve for repeated renewable terms provided they maintain their commitment to the college and the board's work.

Holding a trusteeship at _____ College offers many rewards. They come from being an important participant in efforts to enhance the college's reputation and standing among exceptional liberal arts colleges, the intellectual stimulation that working in partnership with outstanding scholars and educators provides, and the appreciation that comes with dedicated service to current and future generations of young people.

Illustrative Trustee Self-Review Survey

(Name of Institution)

As part of the board's mandate to the committee on trustees to review the performance of trustees who are eligible for reelection, all board members are asked to complete this form about one year before they complete their current term. The committee and respondents have found the information provided in this form to be very helpful.

As you know, the board adopted a *Statement on Commitment and Responsibilities of the Members of the Board of Trustees* to clarify the expectations we hold for one another. We ask all board members to review it, along with the board's *Statement of Policy on Conflicts of Interest*, and to sign a disclosure statement each year. Only the members and staff of the committee on trustees will see your responses.

Please return the completed form in the envelope provided. Thank you for your participation in this process.

Please write a brief statement that reflects your level of achievement for each of the following trustee responsibilities:

- Attendance at board meetings
- Active participation on one or more board committees
- Personal financial contributions
- Participation in fund-raising efforts
- Initiatives to help promote the institution (with alumni, potential applicants, and others with personal influence)
- Active participation with other board members to shape and review the best possible board policies

Please answer the following additional questions:

- How has your participation as a trustee contributed to the board's work through its committees and otherwise? In a similar vein, if you have special interests, talents, or skills that could be shared more fully, please elaborate on them.

Illustrative Trustee Self-Review Survey continued

- How can your effectiveness as a trustee be enhanced? (For example, if you seek a change in committee membership, please elaborate on why.)
- Will your personal commitments leave you with adequate time to serve as an effective trustee in the next several years?
- Please indicate your level of interest in continuing as a trustee:
  - Very interested and willing
  - Interested
  - Not certain
  - Not interested or not able
- Do you have other personal comments you wish to convey to the committee on trustees?

By signing this form and returning it to [the board corporate secretary or the chair of the committee on trustees], I acknowledge that I have reviewed and understand the requirements and conditions of the *Statement of Policy on Conflicts of Interest* adopted by the board of trustees that has been provided to me separately.

Date: _____ *Signature:* _____

(to accompany Trustee Self-Review Survey)

[Date]

[Addressee]

Dear [Name]:

Since 1995, the board has mandated that the committee on trustees conduct a process of periodic review of its members and has found this to be effective and valuable. These reviews begin early in the final year of each member's current term so that both the trustees and the board (through the committee on trustees) can gain a fresh perspective on the experience of individual trustees prior to the reelection process. In addition to a brief, written self-review, the committee typically asks about meeting attendance, giving records, and other examples of commitment to the college and to the trusteeship.

Enclosed is a copy of the *Board's Statement of Commitment and Responsibilities* (adopted in 1996) and a self-review form, which you are asked to complete and send to the office of the president at the college using the envelope enclosed. The responses you provide on the form will be shared only with members of the committee on trustees and board officers.

You will also find enclosed a copy of the *Statement of Policy on Conflicts of Interest*, which the board adopted several years ago. Your signature at the bottom of the second page of the self-review form will confirm that you are aware of and understand the requirements and conditions of this statement. Please mail your completed self-review form by [date] so that it can be made available to the committee on trustees in advance of the next meeting.

Thank you very much, [Name]. I look forward to seeing you again at our next meeting.

Sincerely,

[Name]
Chair, Committee on Trustees

Enclosures
cc: Chairman of the Board, President of the College, Secretary of the College

(Excerpts from AGB's Board Self-Study Criteria)

A much more comprehensive form also can be developed for completion *privately and anonymously* by each board member. By aggregating responses, each board member can see how his or her responses compare with those of colleague trustees as a group. Any temptation to "score" responses should be avoided, however. This kind of survey or checklist can be used as part of a periodic board self-assessment process every three or four years.

The following "trustee audit" is taken from a comprehensive AGB board self-assessment survey that addresses ten criteria for reviewing board performance. The responsibilities of individual trustees differ from those of boards. This audit is designed to help individual trustees assess and reflect on their own board service and on the expectations generally held for all trustees.

Except as otherwise shown, each of these queries provides for "yes," "no," or "*somewhat or sometimes*" response next to it.

Background

Do you have a reasonably clear sense of your obligations and responsibilities as a trustee?

Do you have a clear grasp of your board's responsibilities?

Please mark with an "x" (1) your strongest areas of expertise based on your background and personal experience and (2) your primary areas of interest outside of your background and experience.

	Expertise	*Interest*
Budget/Finance		
Investments		
Management		
Planning		
Legal Affairs		
Plant Management		

Illustrative Trustee Audit
CONTINUED

	Expertise	*Interest*
Real Estate	☐	☐
Insurance/Risk Management	☐	☐
Student Affairs	☐	☐
Faculty Affairs	☐	☐
Fund-Raising	☐	☐
Public Relations	☐	☐
Marketing	☐	☐
Government Relations	☐	☐
Education	☐	☐
Other: _____	☐	☐

Knowledge of the Institution

- Are you familiar with your institution's history and what makes it distinctive?
- Are you generally familiar with the institution's stated mission, priorities and needs, and policies?
- Do you know which major academic programs are particularly outstanding, which are weak, and why?

Board and Committee Meetings

- Are you pleased with both your attendance and level of participation at board and committee meetings?
- Do you read the minutes of meetings to help determine whether they faithfully represent the proceedings and decisions as you recall them?
- Do you help the board steer clear of nonpolicy or management matters better left to the president and the administration?

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Fund-Raising and Public Relations

- Do you contribute a gift to your institution according to your means for:
  - — annual operations?
  - — capital campaigns?
- Within the past year or two, have you helped to secure a gift from an individual, corporation, or other source for your institution?
- Within the past year or two, have you taken advantage of an opportunity to say a good word about your institution to an influential person or organization?

Trustee Concerns

- Are you clear in your understanding of your institution's financial condition?
- Do you keep your chief executive informed of any substantial and continuing personal relationships and communication with individuals on campus?
- Do you avoid asking special favors of the administration?
- Have you found your trusteeship to be stimulating and rewarding thus far? Why?
- Compared with that of your colleague trustees, how would you rate your commitment and performance at this time?
  - ☐ Above average
  - Average
  - ☐ Below average

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BOARD BASICS

This publication is part of **Board Basics**, an AGB series devoted to strengthening the effectiveness of governing boards and trustees. Board Basics comprises several topic clusters — The Fundamentals, Effective Committees, Financial Matters, Foundation Relations, Fund-Raising, and Strategic Decisions — each of which contains several booklets. Several assumptions underlie the series:

- The responsibilities of academic trusteeship are often ambiguous. Trustees need concise, accessible, and focused information to help them carry out their complex fiduciary and stewardship responsibilities.
- Basic principles of trusteeship remain constant across higher education, regardless of institutional type, size, and mission. The series highlights these general principles to provide trustees with a core of knowledge they can apply to their individual institutions.
- The series addresses the distinguishing characteristics of academic trusteeship, especially as it differs in scope, substance, and focus from corporate directorships and other board service.

AGB and the authors welcome comments and suggestions for improving this publication and others in the series. Call the AGB Publications Department at 800/356-0343 or visit our Web site at www.agb.org for more information.

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